

The Agony of the Ecstasy: "Snitch" and "Escape from Planet Earth"

Written by Mike Schulz

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SNITCH

As a film star, Dwayne Johnson possesses a lot of gifts – or, at least, sufficiently impressive gifts for what his résumé has required. Though God knows he’s physically intimidating, Johnson is also our most thoroughly genial of ass-kickers, with even his most violent of big-screen endeavors leavened by a welcome lightness of touch and hint of amused self-mockery. And as he has proved in all those bland family entertainments over the years, Johnson still manages to appear game and committed in movies that don’t deserve his considerable charisma, often salvaging entire scenes through unexpectedly silly gestures or readings that show just how inventive a comedian he can be. (I was happy for 10 whole minutes following his brief channeling of co-star Michael Caine in *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island*. They were about the only 10 minutes during the movie in which I was happy.)

Yet while he can be (literal) enormous fun to watch, Johnson hasn’t yet proven that he’s an actor of much depth or substance, and sadly, that’s exactly what was needed in the action drama *Snitch*. In fairness, director Ric Roman Waugh’s outing is formulaic and tonally awkward enough to suggest that no one could have completely pulled off Johnson’s role as a gruff, loving father who agrees to serve as a DEA informant in exchange for his teen son’s release from prison. But it seems that the only way *Snitch* could have overcome its built-in genre limitations – as last fall’s

End

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of Watch

did, and rather spectacularly – was for Johnson to fill his John Matthews character with so much internal conflict and such depth of feeling that he transcended cliché. Instead, while the performer's concentration is admirable, his lack of nuance and emotional variety isn't, and as he's robbed of all opportunities for humor here, Johnson's naturally appealing personality is unable to emerge. This is not, in other words, the sort of movie that should have reserved its single joke for its final three minutes.

Structurally, Waugh's film (which he co-wrote with Justin Haythe) is more than a bit of a mess. On one hand, it appears to want to be a serious-minded issue drama exploring the perils of mandatory-minimum drug sentencing, one that might have carried more weight had the sentencing of Matthews' son (Rafi Gavron) not come off as ... well ... kind of deserved. (You Skype with your friend; you tell your friend that you and your girlfriend want to try Ecstasy; even though you tell him not to, your friend insists that he's sending you a big box of the stuff; a package arrives via mail carrier Is it really a smart choice to *accept* that delivery?) But Waugh's and Haythe's script boasts too many plot holes and lapses in logic for comfort, and there's much too much generically disposable dialogue for the movie to emerge as any kind of hard-hitting exposé. We even get the scene in which Susan Sarandon, as a curt DEA agent, trots out that old "My hands are tied, there's nothing I can do" chestnut, which occurs 60 whole

is
something she can do.

But at least – thanks to Gavron, Sarandon, Barry Pepper, and David Harbour – there's some strong acting going on in the downbeat legal-drama sequences. This is not, unfortunately, the case when the movie gets into routine action-flick mode, with Benjamin Bratt showing up as a broadly stereotypical drug kingpin who hisses howlers such as "*I ain't lettin' no one get between me and my bread* ." Guns blast, cars crash and flip (and flip and flip), and nothing that happens has the slightest resonance, mostly because the film's star isn't at all resonant himself. Whether dealing with his son or or the feds or one of Bratt's many mules, Johnson reads his lines with conviction, but all you can hear is the reading; he doesn't yet display the acting resources necessary to turn serviceable dialogue into words that seem to come from within. Johnson is all Movie Star, which isn't always a bad thing, and has oftentimes turned out to be a very

good
thing. Yet until he's willing (or able) to fully drop his successfully crafted persona and appear truly conflicted or tortured or vulnerable on-screen, he should probably shy away from more movies of

Snitch

's ilk. Suddenly, the prospect of yet another

Journey to the Center of the Earth

sequel doesn't seem like such a downward step.

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ESCAPE FROM PLANET EARTH

On my way to a Saturday-morning viewing of the new *Dark Skies*, my car made contact with a pothole of Guinness World Records proportions, resulting in a flat tire, possible frame damage, and the immediate cancellation of my cineplex journey. (Those with sharp memories may recall that, as I wrote a few weeks back, I briefly considered using the “car trouble” lie to get myself out of attending

Hansel &

Gretel: Witch Hunters

, but I swear: This is on the up-and-up.) As the film wasn’t shown to critics in advance of its opening – which generally signifies a real dud – my heart wasn’t terribly broken by this. But oh how I wish I had paired my Friday screening of

Snitch

with

Dark Skies

as opposed to the movie I

actually

saw, because there’s no way that goofy-looking sci-fi thriller could be anywhere near as irritating as the animated goof that is

Escape from Planet Earth

Truth be told, director Cal Brunker’s tale of a tech-nerd alien (Rob Corddry) forced to save his macho-dipstick brother from nefarious Earthlings shouldn’t have been such a bummer. There’s definite wit in the film’s employment of Nevada’s Area 51 as its central setting and in the revelation of what’s *really* going on at that notorious military base – as evidenced here in a clever, ’50s-style training video for extra-terrestrial immigrants – and heaven knows the cast is filled with game comedians. Beyond our blue-hued hero, whom Corddry vocally enacts with surprising sweetness, the movie also boasts Sarah Jessica Parker, Craig Robinson, Jane Lynch, Chris Parnell, Steve Zahn, William Shatner, Sofia Vergara, and Ricky Gervais, the latter of whose mellifluous yet spiky readings suggest David Brent imitating

2001

’s HAL the computer, or vice versa. (Brendan Fraser, Jessica Alba, and George Lopez also supply character voices, but I’m trying to stay positive here.) But you’ll have a pretty fair idea of

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the overall

Escape from Planet Earth

experience within its first action scene, when one particular alien gets knocked over three separate times, and each time farts upon hitting the ground. The movie isn't just lazy and lowest-common-denominator; it's lazy and lowest-common-denominator in *triplicate*

.

Everything that's annoying about the film – the generically manic chase scenes, the maudlin life lessons exacerbated by maudlin pop ditties, the dialogue that's peppered with “hip” exclamations such as “Wicked!” and “Take *that*, suckers!” – is annoying so repeatedly that the movie begins to feel far longer than the 85 minutes it clocks in at. Yet it certainly would've been easier to forgive the grade-school predictability of its presentation if the thing didn't *look*

so cheap. If, however, you wind up at a screening of

Escape from Planet Earth

, pay particular attention to the background aliens in the opening scene's spaceship locale. By which I mean background

alien

, as one animated biped – seen slowly shuffling along as though wearing boots of lead – has obviously been digitally replicated to suggest a dozen different crew members, all of whom happen to move and walk in exactly the same ways. In this day and age, it's animation so lazy that only viewers ages five and under might fail to be distracted by it ... which I suppose is fitting for a movie that viewers over five might likely be hard-pressed to enjoy.

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